



Free State Atlantic Bar

Bringing Maryland to D.C. Customers

WRITTEN BY TEDDY DURGIN

Brian Leonard, owner-manager of the Free State Atlantic Bar in Washington, D.C., describes his establishment as being “hyper locally focused.” That might be an understatement. This is the last installment in our series of great theme bars and restaurants around Maryland and Washington, D.C. So, what better place to feature for this final feature than a D.C. bar that is . . . Maryland themed!

Yes, for all those homesick Marylanders living in the nation’s capital who are too lazy to drive or Metro it out to the suburbs, the Free State Atlantic Bar offers a wide range of beers, wines, and spirits from Mary-

land and the Mid-Atlantic region. Leonard, who grew up in Aberdeen and went to the University of Maryland, co-owns the bar with his wife Hilarey. He said during a recent interview with the *Beverage Journal*, “We try and focus on small-batch, local producers. As much as possible, we try and serve beer and spirits from within the Mid-Atlantic region. All of our beer and 90 percent of our spirits are from makers in D.C., Maryland, and Virginia, along with a little of Pennsylvania, Delaware, and North Carolina.”

Indeed, beers on the menu as of early December included Nepenthe Brewing and Union Brewing from Bal-

timore; Distillery Lane from Jefferson, Md.; and Capitol Cider House of the District of Columbia. Spirits, meanwhile, ranged from Case 1 Caribbean Rum (Baltimore) and Gray Wolf Lone Vodka (St. Michaels) to McClintock’s Forager Gin (Frederick) and Cotton and Reed Spiced Rum (D.C.)

Leonard stated, “People love that they can order a beer that they typically might only see when they are visiting Baltimore, or on vacation in Ocean City, or out in the suburbs of Maryland. We are going into our sixth year in business, and we have a loyal following and a good customer base. We have found being next to the Capital One Arena, we get an in-



Brian Leonard
Owner / Operator
Free State Atlantic Bar

flux of people from out of town who come in for the Wizards and Capitals games. So, we get a lot of business from that crowd, who aren't necessarily in the area all of the time."

He continued, "We strive to be a neighborhood bar of Chinatown, which is a little tough because the neighborhood is driven more towards the arena and the nearby office buildings. So, there are not as many residents as other neighborhoods in D.C. But we try to be a home for the residents who are there. Otherwise, we have a very large following of Wizards fans and Caps fans and concertgoers. We tend to see a lot of the same faces for different events. We have a lot of regulars who may only be in town once a month."

While the Free State Atlantic Bar does not have a kitchen, its food offerings do extend the Maryland theme offering such pre-packaged local snacks as Otterbien's cookies and Fisher's popcorn.

According to Leonard, "We try to support other small businesses in the community by selling their products and using their products in cocktails. We've fostered a lot of relationships over the years and have really good brewing partners. It can get tricky, because not all types of alcohol are produced locally. So, some things can be a bit more expensive than using your big, national brands. Wherever we can, we strive to use a small-batch

maker."

He added, "But it's all about the customers. I love talking to guests. I started bar backing and bartending 20 years ago now. I'm not behind the bar as much as I once was. But when I am there at night for different events, it's still great to talk to the customers, especially the ones who started coming in six years ago when Free State Atlantic Bar first opened and I was behind the bar all of the time. It's a good feeling to walk in every day and see at least one person that you know."

Free State was Maryland's state nickname when it opposed Prohibition. The overall establishment has a nautical/Chesapeake Bay look complete with old maps, ship lanterns, and oars. The maps were a touch the Leonards added personally. He said. "My wife and I went antiquing on the Eastern Shore and found a bunch of cool, old maps that we turned into

a collage and put on the wall. A few years later, she and I moved to Annapolis. By happenstance, I was looking at one of the maps and saw our neighborhood. That was pretty neat!"

The couple and their staff have definitely seen the highs and lows of the business since opening. Early on, they had only been up and running for a couple of years when the Capitals went on their Stanley Cup run in 2018. Two years later, though, the pandemic hit and Brian and the Mrs. had to put everything he had ever learned about the business into motion to stay open.

He remarked, "Free State is our second bar. The first was Lost and Found a couple of years prior, and we had a bunch of unforeseeable issues with the building. I was talking to another buddy of mine who owns a bar in the city and he told me, 'The problems are what this job is all about. There is going to be an issue, you're going to figure out how to solve it, and then you are going to move past it.' That's just something I try to keep in my head, especially the last few years we've gone through with the pandemic. You've got to be able to figure things out and then move on."

